

Reading central to learning how to write

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By [Walt Gardner](#) on August 6, 2012 7:47 AM

So much of the criticism leveled at public schools today is focused on the deficits that students display in science and math. But I think doing so detracts attention from their equally disturbing shortcomings in writing. Perhaps my experience teaching English for 28 years in the Los Angeles Unified School District at the same high school accounts for my concern.

Yet I'm not alone in this regard. A new study by Drew P. Cingel and S. Shyam Sundar, "Texting, techspeak, and tweens: The relationship between text messaging and English grammar skills," concludes that the more time students spend sending and receiving texts, the worse their grammar skills become ("[YSK, teens 2 fluent in TXT](#)," Los Angeles Times, Aug. 4). That's because it's difficult to switch between standard grammar and the abbreviations used in text messages.

It's not that mastery of grammar alone makes for effective writing. Far from it. It's altogether possible to score high on a grammar test and still be unable to develop a written argument. For example, I remember when diagramming sentences was thought to be indispensable. Yet the transfer to expository writing was minimal, if non-existent. More importantly, however, when students spend so much time texting, they're not reading. And that's the point. I've long believed that the best way to learn how to write is to read. I'm not talking about reading anything. Instead, I'm talking about reading literature that is appropriate to what a student wants to write.

Let me be more specific. When I was an undergraduate in the Ivy League, I desperately wanted to improve my ability to turn out clean, crisp non-fiction in the form of essays. I stumbled on *A Treasury Of Great Reporting* (Simon and Schuster, 1949). The anthology contained what the authors called "literature under pressure" from the Sixteenth Century to our own time. By reading the examples, I began to internalize the rhythm of words and the progression of thinking. I also began to be more selective in my choice of reading material. I found that certain magazines and newspapers consistently published highly compelling arguments in what we now call op-eds. I continue to read voraciously in the belief that writing is a discipline that needs to be continuously practiced in order to remain vital.

I know that my experience will not matter one iota today. Young people want simple and easy solutions. That's why "How To" books are so popular. They purport to provide surefire recipes for a variety of subjects. But when it comes to effective writing, they promise far more than they can possibly deliver.